



MAKING a DIFFERENCE
in HAITI



Osarieme Omokaro
(fourth from left)

Ph.D. student

Spring Break for many college students conjures up images of warm sandy beaches and the roar of the waves. However, that wasn't the case in March of 2012 for 12 students from UNC Charlotte's College of Computing and Informatics (CCI) and five other universities that included Florida A&M University, the University of Delaware, North Carolina A&T State University, Johnson C. Smith University, and Indiana University Bloomington. They had their sights set on three rural schools in northern Haiti as they embarked on a volunteer effort to share their computer expertise with teachers and mentors of young Haitian girls.

Student participants were selected from universities involved in the Students & Technology in

Academia, Research & Service (STARS) Computing Corps, a community that develops leaders to impact the world through computing. Led by the College of Computing and Informatics, STARS is a national consortium of 44 colleges and universities, dedicated to preparing a larger, more diverse computing workforce for the 21st Century.

During the trip, STARS students and professors taught female Haitian students how to use XO laptops to create animations, videos, and storybooks, using an intuitive program called Scratch. The approach was creative problem solving; the students could create whatever they imagined, all they needed to do was give it a little thought and figure it out by trial and error on the laptops.

In addition, email accounts were created for each student in order to provide an avenue for sustained communication after the STARS students left.

“We were definitely able to leverage our technology expertise to impact the lives of the students,” says CCI Ph.D. student Osarieme Omokaro, “and sow seeds of change not just in the schools but also in the surrounding community. One of the things we did was to ask the girls what change they would like to see in their communities.”

Omokaro says they spoke passionately about issues like water pollution and electricity. She says they showed them how they could use technology as a tool for change.

“I believe that because of the work we did in Haiti, these young girls have been enlightened and

motivated to believe that they can achieve much more than they imagined,” says Omokaro.

For fellow UNC Charlotte STARS student Nick Chandler, the experience was life changing. He says he was approached by one of the female mentors and asked if he would create a program that could teach them how to speak English.

“With the help of a fellow student from the college we were able to create a working prototype in about 20 minutes,” says Chandler. “It then took four of us about 30 hours to create a program with 75 words and phrases to teach English. Not only could you see the word but hear it. The program was also scalable so you can push updates through it.”

Chandler says the gratitude and appreciation that was expressed despite of all the hardships the

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Haitians are having was overwhelming. His plan is to develop his own non-profit and continue the effort.

The STARS alternative Spring Break was designed to build upon the "High Hopes Haiti" (HHH), project of Charlotte-headquartered 501c3 non-profit Mothering Across ContinentsSM (MAC) in collaboration with non-profit Hands for Haiti. HHH officially launched in June 2011 when MAC was selected by the Waveplace Foundation as a partner to provide XO laptops, training, and educational courseware to Hatian schools.

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Patricia Shafer, founder and chief catalyst, MAC. "And we're excited by this example of non-profit organizations and academic institutions working together for global good." 🌍

